

REMARKS BY AMBASSADOR PATRICIA A BUTENIS

WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY

May 3, 2003

DHAKA, MAY 3 -- Following is the text of remarks of Ambassador Patricia A. Butenis at the LGED auditorium on the occasion of World Press Freedom Day on Thursday, May 3.

(begin text)

Mr. Kamrul Hassan Monju, diplomatic colleagues, members of the Massline Media Center, distinguished members of the panel, and respected members of the Bangladesh press corps: Assalaamu alaikum and good morning.

Thank you for your warm welcome and for giving me the honor of being chief guest of this important and timely event. Virtually everybody would endorse the statement that a free, fair, and active press is vital for developing and sustaining healthy and productive societies, but sometimes we forget that fighting for and then defending media freedom is a continuous and sometimes difficult process. The United Nations launched World Press Freedom Day in 1993 to remind us of the reality and dangers of censorship and other impediments to press freedom and freedom of expression.

In many countries, including the United States, there is recurring debate over media coverage of major events and whether that coverage is manipulated or unfairly influenced by various interest groups, including government, to support a particular cause. What we see, time after time, is that one person's reality can be another person's litany of lies, but we also see that a free and vigorous press is critical for revealing and discouraging bad behavior by powerful people. A free and vigorous press is also an essential ingredient for creating the marketplace of ideas necessary to develop and expand a modern, successful economy, as well as promoting tolerance and moderation in social attitudes and behavior.

During my time in Bangladesh, I have seen on a nearly daily basis that Bangladeshi media are active and vibrant. Bangladeshi newspapers and more recently Bangladeshi television channels have played an important and proud role in developing the country's democratic traditions and are a key force for encouraging reforms, holding government accountable, and promoting the public debate that is essential to democracy. In recognition of this important role, I am proud to note that, as many of you know first hand, the U.S. Government continues to support media freedom and, through exchanges and training courses, the professional development of both the Bangladeshi print and electronic media.

It is also clear, however, that being a media member in Bangladesh is not without its problems or perils. Violence against journalists is an old story, and the current state of emergency in Bangladesh has introduced ambiguity and uncertainty as journalists seek to navigate the informal controls on media freedoms. It is not surprising that some journalists and editors practice self-censorship and that

journalists who are perceived to be overly aggressive or politically partisan have received unwanted attention from persons in positions of authority.

Harassment, threats, or abuse of journalists, from any quarter, whatever the motive, are wrong. They undermine the truth, undermine the credibility of those applying the pressure and ultimately undermine the interests of democracy in Bangladesh. It is important that the media stand up to and oppose such pressure, and that the government take effective action to prevent such pressure and to maintain a conducive climate for media freedom.

I am not going to let the media escape without criticism, either. As journalists demand and exercise their rights, it is important that they also make every effort to be accurate and balanced. I have lost track of the number of times I have read in the press about statements I did not make, meetings I did not attend, and actions I did not take. In most cases, basic fact checking, such as a call to the Embassy press officer, would have been enough to get the story right.

In conclusion, I would like to acknowledge the presence here today of so many of Bangladesh's leading and most prominent media members -- reporters, editors, photographers, cameramen, and others. I would like to express my admiration for their performance, often under very difficult circumstances, and applaud their commitment to the principles of World Press Freedom Day. You have achieved much in the past and the challenges today require even more effort. I urge you to remain true to your principles, to resist those who seek to undermine media freedom, and to continue playing your key part in building a stronger, more confident and fully democratic Bangladesh.

(end text)

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